

HOWARD KIMELDORF INTERVIEWS FOR *REDS OR RACKETS*?

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ELMER MEVERT, OSCAR HAGEN, DON MEYERS OF ILWU LOCAL 13

INTERVIEWEE: ELMER MEVERT, OSCAR HAGEN, DON MEYERS

INTERVIEWERS: HOWARD KIMELDORF

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[00:00:00] **HOWARD KIMELDORF:** Okay, so tell me your name, and spell it for me if you can, okay?
[inaudible] And yours?

[00:00:10] **OSCAR HAGEN:** Oscar Hagen, H-A-G-E-N.

[00:00:15] **HOWARD:** Okay. Don, why don't tell me how you got started on the waterfront?

[00:00:29] **DON MEYERS:** They had a football team here. That was one reason, and I came here during the [inaudible] days, down on the alley on Seventh Street. And they used to pick them in.

[00:01:09] **OSCAR:** Had a shape-up.

[00:01:11] **DON:** Shape-up, yes. And sometimes a fella would have a match on his ear and he would get a job. Well, I didn't really know what those matches was in those days, because I was kind of an extra. Well we went on the jobs, they took on the policy, I guess they may be paid off or something, I don't know what they had. But it was us fellas that was started in here, and we were in a football team, we kind of got what was left-over. Some of those jobs, nobody else wanted.

[00:01:55] **HOWARD:** What football team was this?

[00:01:56] **DON:** Well they called it the Blue Tide. Longshoremen.

[00:02:00] **HOWARD:** Oh, okay. So, you were with, it was a team, it was out of like, what the Marine Service Bureau something like that? Organized by them?

[00:02:08] **DON:** Yes.

[00:02:09] **HOWARD:** Okay. And you worked extra? Most of that time? One of the questions I wanted to ask you, before I get to your history is the influence of the Wobblies [Industrial Workers of the World] during the late twenties. Did you see any evidence of their activities in [San] Pedro?

[00:02:24] **DON:** No, never.

[00:02:24] **HOWARD:** Not at all? Even a few quiet guys who were just kind of hanging around the edges?

[00:02:29] **DON:** No.

[00:02:29] **HOWARD:** Nothing at all? Okay. Oscar, why don't you tell me how you got started on the waterfront in Portland [Oregon] , the year and the circumstances.

[00:02:37] **OSCAR:** By accident. I happened to be down on Skid Row, down in Portland. And I happened to run into a guy who was coming out of a restaurant who I had gone to school with Back East. And he asked me what I was doing—and I was on my way to Seattle [Washington] , I was unemployed and I was horsing around. And he said, "Come down to the hall, and maybe you could get a job." And I said, "Okay." And that's how I got started, worked extra, like they say, through a—we had a shape-up that was different, we had a shape-up on the hall. Hiring hall. And that's when I started.

[00:03:16] **HOWARD:** What year was that?

[00:03:18] **OSCAR:** Nineteen twenty-eight.

[00:03:19] **HOWARD:** And I'll ask you the same question to you about the influence of the Wobblies, was there much of a Wobbly presence in Portland?

[00:03:24] **OSCAR:** Not on the waterfront. There were individuals—if I was smart enough, probably I could identify them, but at that time, I couldn't. I was just a young fella, 21 years old. And the Wobblies influence had

kind of left. Well it left its mark, but there, there weren't anybody active anymore. They had left their mark back in 1921, '22, and '23, around the lumbering camps, in Oregon and Washington, reaching back into the other commodities, back into the Middle West where I had a red card, didn't know what for—

[00:04:15] **HOWARD:** Did you?

[00:04:15] **OSCAR:** But I rode a freight on it. You couldn't ride unless you had a red card back there in the harvest field. Because the Wobblies had taken over, they took over and they died in a couple of years—they died out. They scattered.

[00:04:35] **HOWARD:** So you had a red card principally to ride the freights, that was it? Or you had no identification with the Wobblies beyond that? Or . .

[00:04:42] **OSCAR:** No, that's all.

[00:04:42] **HOWARD:** That's it?

[00:04:43] **OSCAR:** That's all. Well, if you know anything about the background of the Wobblies, what they would do in the area, they had these mass meetings, they had their problems and they signed up a lot of people and left. And they left leaving no leadership, and that's how they fell apart.

[00:05:04] **HOWARD:** So you basically took out your red card when you were migratory labor in the Midwest or something?

[00:05:08] **OSCAR:** Yes, it only lasted for the two summers that I worked the harvest. Because the only way you'd get to point to point, unless you had your own transportation, was to ride a freight. And it was a hell of a lot of people riding the freights. And we had a formative press in those years too.

[00:05:30] **ELMER MEVERT:** Off the record.

[00:05:34] **HOWARD:** Off the record. All right, so how many guys were in a similar situation on the waterfront, on the Portland waterfront, was that sort of a common source of migration, like from the migratory camps out to the lumber and then to the waterfront?

[00:05:45] **OSCAR:** No, they were a conglomeration of some sailors, quite a few loggers, and the rest of our relatives or friends of management and stump ranchers—you know what stump ranchers are [bootleg log sellers] . They had their own place and they maybe had a couple of chickens and some cows and what have you, and they worked on the waterfront at the same time, and they're still doing it, incidentally.

[00:06:24] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you a real tough question, if you had to assign percentages of these, what proportion of the longshoremen in Portland were ex-sailors or ex-loggers, would you give an estimate on that? When you came out of the front?

[00:06:40] **OSCAR:** The sailors were inconsequential until after the '34 strike, that's when they came. And the loggers were the same. I would say at least, because it's a big industry up there, I would say that, if I could make a fair estimate, it'd be about between 30 to 35 percent had been loggers.

[00:07:02] **HOWARD:** In '28? Or after '34?

[00:07:06] **OSCAR:** Back before '34 there were a lot of loggers. And then a lot of loggers came in after '34.

[00:07:11] **HOWARD:** So about a third, then, or so were loggers?

[00:07:15] **OSCAR:** Make it 30 percent.

[00:07:16] **HOWARD:** Yes.

[00:07:19] **OSCAR:** And that's just a rough estimate.

[00:07:21] **HOWARD:** Yes, that's what most people—I know some people might know up there, who was it? Elmer? No not Elmer. I'm trying to think of his name—Jack Mallory. Do you know Jack?

[00:07:31] **OSCAR:** Oh Christ, yes.

[00:07:32] **HOWARD:** I interviewed him recently, he came out with about 30 percent also.

[00:07:35] **OSCAR:** Yes, he's still alive? He's an old man.

[00:07:39] **HOWARD:** He's still alive. He goes way back. He's older than you because he started in 1916 on the 'front.

[00:07:43] **OSCAR:** Yes, I know Jack. He was a pretty damn, good ol' guy.

[00:07:47] **HOWARD:** Yes, I liked him. He was neat. Yes, he's getting old, as you can imagine.

[00:07:51] **OSCAR:** He's in his eighties, I know.

[00:07:54] **HOWARD:** Yes, late eighties I think. Yes, he gets around with a couple of canes, but he's still sharp upstairs. Yes, okay, and before we leave the Wobblies thing, I want to ask you a couple of questions. You mentioned that your dad and a few other guys rode the trains out here from Arizona and New Mexico. You thought they carried red cards and you thought they were in the Western Federation of Miners.

[00:08:14] **ELMER:** Hold on, my dad belonged to the Western Federation of Miners. Whether they had a red card, per se, I never knew. But, evidently, he must've had to get to California.

But my dad and I never discussed politics. I just kind of sensed. Like I said, I was just a young punk, I had eyes, I had ears. I was in this state of flux, more or less. I questioned certain things with what was happening, or what they taught me in high school, but as far as my dad's—I know he was left-wing leaning, but whether he rode on the red card, per se, I don't know. But he must have. Because he came out with Archie Royal from New Mexico.

[00:09:02] **HOWARD:** I want to ask you, were they possibly in the Bisbee Deportation [mass kidnapping and deportation of striking miners] ? Were they involved in that?

[00:09:06] **ELMER:** No, no, no. That was something else. That was in Arizona. No, my dad was not mixed up in that. He worked in the coal mines in Dawson. Dawson, New Mexico. Yes, him and a bunch of other guys out there, were trying to organize the Western Federation of Miners, and they told him to take a hike.

[00:09:30] **HOWARD:** Who else, besides Archie Royal's dad, had a similar occupational background, in other words hard rock mining, Western Federation, that sort of stuff? Were there very many? I know this is all speculation because you weren't there, but on the waterfront. . .

[00:09:44] **ELMER:** I would say too many miners and too many hard rock miners didn't show up on the waterfront.

[00:09:50] **HOWARD:** They didn't?

[00:09:50] **ELMER:** No, no. That's my impression. I mean, Archie Royal was one, my dad was one, and Bill Lawrence's dad was one, but he disappeared, nobody ever knows what happened to him. He was in the Bisbee thing.

[00:10:06] **HOWARD:** Oh, Bill Lawrence's dad was one?

[00:10:08] **ELMER:** Yes, but he disappeared from the scene. Period. Nobody ever knows what happened to him.

[00:10:13] **HOWARD:** Do you think he was here for the 1923 strike? Was Bill Lawrence's dad involved in that, or do you know?

[00:10:22] **ELMER:** No, I don't think so.

[00:10:23] **HOWARD:** Was your dad involved?

[00:10:25] **ELMER:** My dad was in the '23 strike, yes.

[00:10:27] **HOWARD:** And Archie Royal's dad was in it?

[00:10:29] **ELMER:** Yes.

[00:10:30] **HOWARD:** I'm trying to figure out if they were a major force, these sort of guys who came out of the Western Federation of Miners had been somewhat radicalized by that, got pushed out of the mining communities to the waterfront in [San] Pedro and San Francisco [California] .

[00:10:42] **ELMER:** Well, my father for example, even though he had these ideas, he was not too eloquent. He would talk amongst the men that he worked with and stuff like that. I mean, his main idea was to organize the union.

He was not too eloquent. But he did his, as you might say, [?fraternizing?] in a quiet manner. And once the guy that he worked, he worked [inaudible] he worked for the different Quaker mines, stuff like that. And then up to the '30, well, '30 to when first, they started to organize, and then culminating in the '34 strikes.

[00:11:23] **HOWARD:** Who was the, who do you think was probably the leadership or the inspiration for the '23 strike in Pedro? I mean the Wobblies were here obviously, but I'm wondering why they had such a strong following in the San Pedro [California] waterfront? Whether it might've been guys who came out of the Western Federation of Miners who had been miners, who have been planted on the waterfront, years before?

[00:11:40] **ELMER:** Well there were lot of northern loggers come down too.

[00:11:45] **HOWARD:** Okay. And they tended to be kind of radical and more open to radical ideas, as a rule, the loggers, the ex-loggers?

[00:11:52] **ELMER:** Oh, yes.

[00:11:53] **HOWARD:** Was that your experience also?

[00:11:55] **OSCAR:** Loggers, oh yes.

[00:11:56] **HOWARD:** Why?

[00:11:57] **OSCAR:** Why? Because [inaudible] on the lot, and the conditions that were in some cases, less than human, they had to pack their own blankets, they—this is before the Wobblies got in there and cleaned it up. They had packed their own blankets. They paid them what they wanted to pay them, and their sleeping facilities, housing facilities were lousy, and I mean lousy! They had bed bugs and lice and everything else. And in fact, when I was a kid, 16, I worked at the lumber camps in northern Wisconsin, where they had lice and bedbugs both, and I slept right on them.

[00:12:44] **HOWARD:** What proportion of the loggers were married?

[00:12:47] **OSCAR:** Loggers?

[00:12:48] **HOWARD:** Yes, early twenties.

[00:12:51] **OSCAR:** I don't know how you could even begin to guess, unless you've been around them. But I've been around lately. Because the principle business in Oregon and Washington, was logging! Or some parts of it. Working in the mill, and so forth. And I don't know, maybe it could be 15 or 20 percent of them, that were just drifters. And maybe could be more, could be more than that. And those are the ones that you saw on Skid Row and they were out-of-state, and they went back and forth all the time, they weren't married.

[00:13:32] **HOWARD:** So. you're saying probably a majority were married though, in your estimation?

[00:13:35] **OSCAR:** I would say that the majority were married.

[00:13:37] **HOWARD:** Okay, and how does that compare with sailors? Anyone want to venture a guess on that? Were sailors more or less likely to be married than loggers?

[00:13:44] **OSCAR:** Oh sailors, less likely.

[00:13:46] **ELMER:** I would tend to confirm that too.

[00:13:50] **HOWARD:** Is that your feeling as well?

[00:13:52] **DON:** At that time, today's it's flipped.

[00:13:54] **HOWARD:** Yes. So loggers are more likely to be married than sailors, but probably both categories are less likely to be married than longshoremen? Is that correct?

[00:14:04] **OSCAR:** Well, yes. The sailors for instance, they're in and out, they're happy-go-lucky, in fact they don't know what to do when they get ashore. They just wait, get drunk, and lose their pay, catch another ship and do the same thing all over again. So they're not stable. They don't stay in one place. And where the longshoremen and sailors both have a tendency to more or less stay in the same area, where they have more chance of getting employment.

[00:14:44] **HOWARD:** You mean, longshoreman and loggers both?

[00:14:46] **OSCAR:** Yes. I mean sailors, of course, I mean I couldn't tell you what percentage of them were drifters, but there were lots of them.

[00:14:58] **HOWARD:** Let me just ask you this before we move on in this, the 1922 strike in Portland was the last major fight of the unions, the Wobblies were involved and a few other groups. When you came on in on the waterfront in 1928, did the men ever talk about the '22 strike?

[00:15:12] **OSCAR:** Well, hardly. Not until '34 anyway, because they had the blackball system there. I was blackballed.

[00:15:22] **HOWARD:** Were you?

[00:15:22] **OSCAR:** That's how I came out, came riding, went over in the wheat fields, you know? No, take that back that was when I was 18, 19 years old. But I was blackballed, and anybody that spoke unionism or anything else, they got eased off one way or another. Most people were homegrown folks, and they weren't about to lose their job, you know? Until they got together for the concerted effort for the strike. No, they were very much in the background. The only place that you saw them was where an individual, it would be a dyed in the wool Wobbly on the streets in Portland, where they'd have their magazine bag, putting out The Daily Worker, you know? I remember that, on the streets of Portland.

[00:16:23] **HOWARD:** The Industrial Pioneer or something, The Industrial Worker. Wouldn't have been The Daily Worker. That was the Communist Party newspaper, right?

[00:16:29] **ELMER:** The Industrial Worker.

[00:16:29] **DON:** The Industrial Worker or the IWW.

[00:16:30] **HOWARD:** Yes. So, when you came on, there wasn't much of the Wobblies, there wasn't much discussion with the '22 strike, and by '34 maybe some of that came out of the open, or maybe not?

[00:17:00] **OSCAR:** Naturally, there's always someone, who when they think that they're safe and doing so or saying so will come out and boast about it, what he did during other the strikes. And we had a lot of people there worked on the waterfront after '22, '23 strikes because the strike was broken. And the favorite son stayed there, and paid off, and worked and so forth. But after the '34 strike, then some of this come out in the open, but I couldn't give you a very good idea about how prevalent this was or who the members were, the membership of the party. Because that, to my knowledge, didn't exist very much, because, hell I wouldn't recognize him if I saw him at that time. Because I was too young a guy.

[00:18:00] **HOWARD:** How about, let me ask Don a couple of questions. You came on '28, and there'd been a big strike in this harbor in 1923. Did the men talk about that very much, to your recollection?

[00:18:10] **DON:** Never heard a word.

[00:18:11] **HOWARD:** Never word, huh?

[00:18:12] **DON:** They were afraid to talk. After the '34 strike, they all got together, and there was just one union, and that was it. I mean, you went along for years, and try to do better, better, and better, and finally you got to the point where you were organized 100 percent.

[00:18:35] **HOWARD:** Was there any ability to resist the ship owners in the late twenties, if they wanted to have a speed up or reduce the size of a game?

[00:18:41] **DON:** No.

[00:18:42] **HOWARD:** No attempts to resist, whatsoever?

[00:18:44] **DON:** There was, we worked hard in those days. There was nothing—if the ship wasn't loaded by the time, we worked over, we just kept working, till two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock in the morning. Sometimes we were so tired, we couldn't even leave the dock, and we went down to the board shop. We just went over to the side and laid down and go to sleep, lots of places like that.

[00:19:17] **OSCAR:** I worked many ships, many ships up from seven in the morning to midnight, to back at seven the next morning. In the meantime, you were having to eat, go back and forth and so forth. You do that day in, to day out.

[00:19:33] **DON:** And not very much money.

[00:19:37] **HOWARD:** And no security, right? So if you talked back, you were gone.

[00:19:39] **ELMER:** Especially if you talked union.

[00:19:41] **OSCAR:** You know I got blackballed? I was with a bunch of other guys. We started to form a union. And that was, well it started up in Tacoma [Washington] , really there in the Columbia River, and it came into Portland. And we started to form a union. I think it was the fall of 1930. Yes, the fall of 1930. And you joined a union by giving them a dollar, and we had our meetings, we elected a business agent and—

[00:20:15] **HOWARD:** Was that the ILA [International Longshoremen's Association] , or do you remember?

[00:20:21] **OSCAR:** It was, everything was ILA back then. The whole coast, Tacoma and everything else. And well, when that happened, we had a couple of meetings, and then, they decided against the ILA buttons and those who wore them. And those wore them got fired and black lawed and we had a shape-up there, and it wasn't out in the dock, it was out in the hull. So you could go out in that hull, and you were perched there, like a bird.

[00:20:58] **HOWARD:** Okay, let me then to move on to the thirties, which is what I really wanted to concentrate on today if possible. One thing I wanted to get at was a better sense of the role of the left, the Marine [Transport] Workers Industrial Union and organizations like that, the Communist Party on the waterfront, whether they had much of an impact, and how much of the strike would have gone on the way that it did had they not been there. Now I know they had a much greater impact in San Francisco, than they did elsewhere along the waterfront, or along the Pacific Coast, I don't know too much about their activities in either

Pedro or the Northwest. So why don't we start with Portland. Do you remember anything about the Marine Workers Industrial Union?

[00:21:40] **OSCAR:** No, I heard of them, but I didn't hear anything about them. If they were a force at all, and that would be later on, after the union was in business. Because, well, I mean, there was no leadership. And everything seemed to be concentrated on San Francisco. And there was some concentration down in [San] Pedro, but to what extent I don't know, just what I heard.

[00:22:12] **HOWARD:** How about you, do you remember anything?

[00:22:14] **DON:** No, I don't remember anything.

[00:22:14] **HOWARD:** Nothing at all?

[00:22:15] **DON:** Not at all.

[00:22:19] **OSCAR:** See, everything was in a state of flux. You see the sailors strike, you see the longshoremen strike, and the elements within those different organizations, you didn't get to know. You got to know those in the—the few who were radical or whatever you want to call them, but it stopped there. So usually, these organizations didn't come to a head to make themselves known very much, until these strikes that had earned these unions, a few decent conditions. Because they were, for one reason or another, they weren't listened to.

[00:23:23] **HOWARD:** Well, let me ask you that. What was the reason they wouldn't have been listened to? Can you imagine?

[00:23:27] **OSCAR:** It's the aftermath of the, well they had too many in the first place. The Socialist Party in the United States was split up in so many damn fragments, everybody's going in their own direction, and so we couldn't settle for any, you could get, I knew a few guys on the waterfront later, after I've been down there for a while who were avowed members of the Communist Party and so forth. But they weren't a voice, you got most of your leadership from outside, who would come and go. And they were generally there, because it was in the interest of some the organizations, say I don't know, the sailors would come and speak to us and ask for support and so forth.

[00:24:24] **HOWARD:** Were the, I got to ask these kinds of probing questions, and get as much detail as possible. So I mean, it's not like I'm probing into your consciousness or something like that, I just want to get a real firm grip on this, you said there were couple of guys who were avowed communist on the waterfront. Were they longshoremen or offshore workers?

[00:24:42] **OSCAR:** Longshoremen.

[00:24:43] **HOWARD:** Longshoremen? And you said they weren't much of a voice.

[00:24:47] **OSCAR:** There was no leadership.

[00:24:48] **HOWARD:** No voice in [San] Pedro? As far as you know? Well, okay go ahead.

[00:24:54] **OSCAR:** You see, we had an element [inaudible] anti-this, anti-that, and anti-everything else.

[00:25:01] **HOWARD:** What does that mean? Anti-what?

[00:25:04] **OSCAR:** Anti-communist, anti-Trotsky, anti-socialist. And so they never, got pretty much their foot hole down there.

[00:25:11] **HOWARD:** Are you talking about here or Portland now?

[00:25:14] **OSCAR:** Here. Portland I don't know too much about because I left there for good in 1937.

[00:25:20] **HOWARD:** Okay.

[00:25:21] **ELMER:** 'Thirty-six is when I got [inaudible] .

[00:25:24] **HOWARD:** Okay, yes. But the people here, I mean you saw a couple of active communists on the Portland waterfront, is that what you were talking about, or was that here what you were making a reference to?

[00:25:33] **OSCAR:** That was down here.

[00:25:35] **HOWARD:** Okay. What about in Portland?

[00:25:37] **OSCAR:** Up there, we had people, I wouldn't call them communist, although some people did call them radicals, or socialists, or bomb throwers, like the guy you were just talking about.

[00:25:49] **HOWARD:** Mallory?

[00:25:50] **OSCAR:** Yes, Mallory, and there was two or three old-timers that'd been around there for years. And they were called names, and so forth, but not too many to an extent. We weren't ostracized, you know, like, especially down in Pedro. Jesus Christ, you'd ostracize the shit out of anybody that wasn't just a plain old trade unionist. Or an active one.

[00:26:16] **HOWARD:** Now the question is why? Why in San Francisco the workers would accept open communist leadership even though they didn't believe in it necessarily, but in a place like [San] Pedro, they didn't get much of a forum to speak, or even in Portland. Seattle seemed to be a little more receptive too.

[00:26:31] **OSCAR:** Well, I'm not getting ahead of myself, the reason for that is that when we had a strike in 1934, the June sixteenth agreement, do you know what that is? Up and down the Pacific Coast they had it, June sixteenth agreement in 1934 to vote the proposition that the leadership of these votes of Joe Ryan [former ILA president] , to vote, the agreement that he reached the employer with, up or down. And San Pedro was the only one that voted it up. The rest of the ports voted it down. And that's what constituted, that's why, that's what constituted the thinking or the element they have here, in the leadership, incidentally.

[00:27:26] **HOWARD:** So you think that's the reflection of leadership in [San] Pedro that made the—

[00:27:34] **ELMER:** Having been raised in [San] Pedro since a kid, almost, I think that one reason for this, [San] Pedro was always considered a weak link in the organized coast wide. And I think the main reason why there was so many scabs left from 1923, that even though they did join a union, eventually, they were old, old super reactionary trade unionist type that wanted the ILA here in here, period. That was it. They couldn't, brook any extraneous thinking, independently.

[00:28:15] **HOWARD:** Okay, let me pause right here. You suggested once before, and it seemed to make until I started burrowing in, the fact is in Portland the same thing happened in '22, they retained all the old guys who had scabbed. In San Francisco, they broke the union in 1919, retained the all the old-timers. Seattle, they broke it in 1920. So you got all these old guys, you know who scabbed, on the, you know the union men, and they were retained in every port.

[00:28:36] **ELMER:** Well, there seemed to be a higher concentration down there. Well I mean that was—well there was several different reasons.

[00:28:44] **OSCAR:** And different type of individuals.

[00:28:47] **ELMER:** First of all, San Pedro had a lot—listen I'm not being chauvinist [sic] when I'm saying this—a lot of Southerners down there, a lot of Southerners.

[00:28:58] **HOWARD:** Is that right? At that time?

[00:29:00] **OSCAR:** Hokies, Arkys—

[00:29:03] **ELMER:** I'm not being a chauvinist—

[00:29:04] **HOWARD:** No, I understand.

[00:29:05] **ELMER:** I'm just using that term.

[00:29:06] **OSCAR:** Who were friends and relatives of the people who were working there.

[00:29:12] **ELMER:** Complete nepotism. Nepotism is the word. Then of course there was a higher concentration of scabs in this port [pause] that remained. I mean that's my impression. Like of course I was just a kid, when this went on, in retrospect. Well that's my opinion, that there was a higher concentration of the old '23 scabs here that they kind of had a 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' sort of thing with the employers. And the old AFL [American Federation of Labor], ILA groups, and so forth. They couldn't brook any kind of thinking, it was independent. And that's why the Wobblies down there were a very, very mute voice. Very mute. There was very little, like what he said, you didn't hear anything. The most valuable forces down there in San Pedro were not the longshoremen, it was often the industrial marine workers.

[END PART ONE/BEGIN PART TWO]

[00:30:20] **HOWARD:** Okay we're talking about Marine Workers Industrial Union?

[00:30:22] **ELMER:** Well the Marine Workers Industrial Union down there I think, was the most militant group of anybody on the waterfront. I'm not speaking of the longshoremen, because like I said, they had this holdover from the old, the old '23 guys, and that nepotism and all that kind of stuff. But the Marine Workers Industrial Union and the Cannery Workers at that time. I remember the young leaders—I think, I can't remember, I think it was Moore, Moore. A very, very powerful force, were the Cannery Workers Union.

[00:30:53] **HOWARD:** The was a communist-led union at that time wasn't it?

[00:30:56] **ELMER:** A what?

[00:30:57] **HOWARD:** Was that a communist-led union, the Cannery Workers?

[00:30:59] **ELMER:** Well it was accused.

[00:31:01] **HOWARD:** Yes, okay. Yes.

[00:31:03] **ELMER:** I don't know. I don't put labels on people.

[00:31:05] **HOWARD:** I didn't mean to red band, I'm just trying to get identifications.

[00:31:08] **ELMER:** I mean, the Marine Workers, Marine Industrial Workers Union was accused of being left-wing but, the Cannery Workers, at that time the radio operators and engineers were beginning to feel their [inaudible] . They had a lot of independent, well I would say left-wing thinking on there. And the Marine Cooks and Stewards were a very good force. That's where we got our main support. It's from these groups like the Marine Workers Industrial Union and so forth. The Teamsters were nil. They were nothing. Absolutely nothing. The sailors union was—we were always skeptical. You never know what the hell they were going to do. In other words, with us or against us, wasn't that right?

[00:32:03] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you about the MWIU [Marine Workers Industrial Union] , the Marine Workers. Did they have much of an influence among the longshoremen, to your knowledge?

[00:32:13] **ELMER:** Well, in a peripheral sense, yes. Some of it did rub off. But after the '34 strike some of these Wobblies that were quiet all these years—as you know Wobblies were apolitical. Some of the Wobblies did turn and actually go forward and do political acts. Many of them didn't, I mean that's why some of these fractions and these splits that existed at the time, but he mentioned them. In the socialist party and all these left-wing parties, there were one in every direction, there was no concentrated leadership! Like in down in San Francisco. I mean there were, Jesus, all kinds of splinter groups! You had anonymous flyers coming out at night who were supporting longshoremen to go this route and all that kind of stuff, you know? But there was nothing concentrated.

[00:33:12] **HOWARD:** What about rallies? You know, I remember reading in The Los Angeles Times that there were a number of rallies throughout the strike. They'd go out to these vacant lots near the harbor and have three of four hundred guys and they'd talk about the speakers exhorting the crowd to support industrial unionism and things like that. And you're telling me there wasn't much evidence of this that you remember?

[00:33:30] **DON:** No, no I don't remember.

[00:33:32] **HOWARD:** You don't remember anything? Anything at all? Any kind of rallies that were being held along the waterfront?

[00:33:38] **DON:** After we went to work, under the union [inaudible] , there was altogether different. We didn't have the trouble that they had before. We had our own hall and everything was kind of organized better, so we didn't have the trouble, maybe like San Francisco. You see these—the people didn't live in San Pedro, all of them. They lived on Long Beach [California] , lived in Compton [California] , some lived in Los Angeles [California] , Santa Ana [California] —all around. They weren't in the group that they call the Wobblies or whatever you call them, in those days. They were like a new one, a new group.

[00:34:29] **HOWARD:** Are you suggesting they were sort of like outsiders? Or something?

[00:34:37] **DON:** Not outsiders.

[00:34:39] **HOWARD:** Is that your sense of it?

[00:34:41] **ELMER:** Well I think I get what he's trying to say. Like what Oscar mentioned, a lot of these longshoremen around here, at that time, they were stump ranchers in Lomita [California] , they were near Redondo [Redondo Beach, California] . They raised goats, they raised strawberries, pheasants and it was a—actually they weren't longshoremen as we think of them. They were longshoremen by accident, so to speak. Because they knew somebody. Somebody was in the position to give them a job. So they'd use that more or less as a prop to augment their incomes. Their stump rations and so forth. And actually, as you can tell, it was after 1934 that we became more or less consolidated to kind of a cohesive organization. In spite of the lack of leadership down there.

[00:35:45] **HOWARD:** Well these was leadership down here, it was just very conservative, Peterson and guys like that.

[00:35:49] **ELMER:** Oh yes. But I mean, they led us in the wrong direction.

[00:35:53] **HOWARD:** Why do you say that?

[00:35:54] **ELMER:** Well, why'd we kick them out?

[00:35:57] **HOWARD:** Why did you kick them out?

[00:35:58] **OSCAR:** They wanted to retain their leadership.

[00:36:01] **HOWARD:** Peterson and those guys?

[00:36:03] **OSCAR:** Peterson here, and Paddy Ryan—

[00:36:06] **HOWARD:** Paddy Morris [former Pacific Coast ILA Organizer] .

[00:36:07] **OSCAR:** Paddy Morris. And then you had the guys at Portland, Cliff Thurston and those guys. And then they thought they'd be in solid, so they went along with—the conservative part of the membership, went along with them [the ILA] . They were the most—did the most of the, they did most of the talking and were the loudest. And gravel-rousing and the whole goddamn bit trying to retain their leadership.

[00:36:43] **HOWARD:** What do you mean by conservative?

[00:36:46] **OSCAR:** Conservative. Guys that would follow any leader if he could talk fast enough. They didn't have a mind of their own in other words. Because the average guy on the waterfront, at that time, wasn't very educated, they weren't well-educated. It's only after the 1934 strike that we got people that got a little more education, that people decided the waterfront was a pretty good place to work because when you're down there, and eventually you get into union and go to work.

[00:37:17] **HOWARD:** See the reason I asked the question is because everyone tells me that there wasn't much in the way of politics going on in the longshore union, you, that's pretty much your position. The communist,

the radicals didn't have much an influence. And yet they'll talk about members being conservative or radical, like you just did. So what's—

[00:37:36] **OSCAR:** Radical and conservative in the reactionary sense.

[00:37:40] **HOWARD:** Okay, what does that mean?

[00:37:45] **OSCAR:** In other words, we'll go along with what our, with the policies set by for instance, in the case of Joe Ryan. The international organization on both coasts. It was organized under the ILA at one time. And in fact after the strikes were over, Tacoma [Washington] still stayed in the AFL for years and years.

[00:38:08] **ELMER:** Port Angeles [Washington] ?

[00:38:09] **OSCAR:** Port Angeles, yes. So these people were there to make a buck and at the waterfront you can always make a little better money than anywhere else as a common laborer.

[00:38:23] **HOWARD:** Were the dock workers in Tacoma conservative then? Compared to Portland?

[00:38:26] **OSCAR:** I don't know anything as well. They'd follow their leadership because the guy they had, Paddy Morris, the guy they had up there who's a pretty goddamn good politician. They went along with it, and I mean they just went along with it, and they did their work and they brought home with pretty good pay checks. [inaudible] .

[00:38:41] **HOWARD:** So when you guys threw out Cliff Thurston and elected Rosco Craycraft, what was going on there? Was it because Rosco was very articulate? Or did he actually represent something on the political spectrum?

[00:38:53] **OSCAR:** Well, Rosco, he was an agitator for one. But a goddamn good one. And he went along with what he thought was good for the goddamn majority instead of what was good for the individuals.

[00:39:09] **HOWARD:** You don't think Cliff Thurston would make the same argument, or those guys? I'm sure they, I mean they couldn't say, "Hey look I'm running for my own self-interest to keep myself in office."

[00:39:16] **OSCAR:** You don't have to say it, you just follow a certain policy and going along with the policy of the stooges who were numerous up and down this coast. Following the dictates of J.P. Ryan back East. See, they were in there agitating all the time. They had paid representatives from the East Coast running down the West Coast, after the '34 strike, and '36 to '37 they had son-of-a-bitch of a time, those bastards. Harry Bridges was running up and down the coast, trying to negate their goddamn policies. And of course the guys, they could see a job coming, like Cliff Thurston and. . .who the hell's the other guy? He got a secretary up there. They thought they were in solid, they had a job for life. But they got fooled when we decided to join the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] , and they were against it. Well so they got lucky and they got out.

[00:40:23] **ELMER:** [inaudible] . These old conservative guys, that, who were backing the ILA. The son of a coastwise union with interchangeable transfers, of what was complete anathema. A lot of these guys wanted a port by port agreement. Lots of guys went with port by port agreement.

[00:40:44] **HOWARD:** Why?

[00:40:45] **ELMER:** Because they had their own, little kingdoms, so to speak.

[00:40:49] **OSCAR:** Because the local leaderships, recommended it. And who they were working for was J.P. Ryan. And of course if you could separate it port by port, and you got port agreements, you can break one here, break one there, and the solidarity is all shot to hell.

[00:41:09] **ELMER:** Another thing was bone of contention, between the conservatives with what I call the liberals, liberal forces were rising because the fact that the liberal forces wanted one union. Where on the other hand, the [Ed Velle?] group, you'd would've had 15 different unions, all crafts set up on the craft [inaudible] . And each little craft would have their own kingdom, so to speak. You'd have a dock worker, you would've had a dockworker's union, you'd would've had a holdman's union, you'd would've had a winch driver's union, you'd have a jitney driver union and factory member—

[00:41:47] **OSCAR:** It was bad in Pedro as it was.

[00:41:49] **ELMER:** Yes, it was bad enough in Pedro. I remember when we forced, the jitney drivers, just to come to the hall, rather than them being their own little private, little group, wore big buttons, "I am a hall driver." "I am a hall driver."

[00:42:12] **HOWARD:** You mean they'd come through the hall to get dispatched or something like that?

[00:42:15] **ELMER:** Yes. Were you here then? We had a hell of time with some these guys.

[00:42:19] **OSCAR:** They had a lumberman's committee and all of those.

[00:42:22] **HOWARD:** So if the radicals weren't busy in this port—let me ask Don this question. If the radicals weren't here, you claim they weren't anywhere, you don't know much about them, so where did the idea for coast-wide unity and one big union come from?

[00:42:36] **DON:** San Francisco.

[00:42:36] **OSCAR:** San Francisco.

[00:42:41] **ELMER:** San Francisco and Harry Bridges.

[00:42:42] **HOWARD:** That's how you guys see it, San Francisco and Harry Bridges?

[00:42:43] **OSCAR:** That's was the mainstay of the organization, before, during and after.

[00:42:47] **DON:** Yes, he headed the whole thing.

[00:42:50] **HOWARD:** Why did you listen to him?

[00:42:53] **OSCAR:** He'd got a good trade union policy as—against the policy set by these stooges of J.P. Ryan. It isn't hard to convince the guys, when you get out there on the rank-and-filer yourself. I mean, that's all he was, the Chairman of the Strength Committee in 1934, he had no other titles. And he went out there and told them, if you didn't do this, didn't do that, you're going to break them. And if you're sincere enough or eloquent enough, you're going to convince most of these people, they are that stupid, after being kicked from pillar to post and—Jesus Christ, the incidents that happened during the pinko [light communism] days, some were

making good money and others were starving to death on the waterfront. When they say equal, equal wages, and equal time and one big union.

[00:43:53] **ELMER:** Equal opportunity.

[00:43:54] **OSCAR:** Equal work opportunity.

[00:43:58] **HOWARD:** Do you remember if the leadership in Portland or San Pedro was taking a different line, in other words were they arguing for port by port agreements?

[00:44:06] **ELMER:** The leadership?

[00:44:07] **HOWARD:** Yes, the leadership. The conservatives, the AFL guys. Do you remember that? Were they making that argument?

[00:44:13] **DON:** Yes, they was—

[00:44:14] **OSCAR:** San Pedro—

[00:44:14] **ELMER:** Oh yes, Pedro. Pedro was the biggest part of the Coast. We'll going independent, we'll go by ourselves, right?

[00:44:24] **HOWARD:** The men pretty much endorsed that, right? The men started that. Right, early on? June sixteenth Agreement they seem to?

[00:44:29] **ELMER:** Well—

[00:44:31] **DON:** Well, they took a vote on that. But it was a coast-wide vote, see? And consequently, no vote won.

[00:44:40] **ELMER:** In San Pedro. San Pedro was always considered a weak link.

[00:44:48] **OSCAR:** It's getting down to the radical element, I don't know what you want to call it. But the radical elements, which turned out mostly to be the Communist party, within the union, they were skirting around the fringes but never, never did get a solid foot-hold in Local 13.

That's right.

[00:45:12] **HOWARD:** Is that your position also?

[00:45:16] **OSCAR:** The reason for that is, and I'll give you a personal reason, the reason for that is that they seemed to following the dictates of someone else. Somewhere else. Someone higher up. And some of the programs that—I talked to him. I talked to Jack Wilson and Henry [inaudible] and those guys and some of the policies that they wanted to introduce, and try to influence people with, have somebody else introduce—because they didn't do it themselves—was way out of line and you couldn't pass it if you couldn't implement it.

[00:45:52] **HOWARD:** Could you be specific? With the policies they might've tried to introduce? Can you think of anything concrete?

[00:45:58] **OSCAR:** Well [pause] yes. For instance, when we were—well we were crowded, we had a hell of a lot of people down there. I was a business agent at the time. Then we took on some membership on a limited basis. And we had a plug board like San Francisco, and they had two types of plugs, there was a red plug and a gray plug. And they wanted—what these people wanted was to have everybody elevated. When the war was over, and we had too many people on this waterfront to start with, and they were registered under there, they were given what was called limited registration. What these people wanted to do was to take a proposition before the membership—and this is one incident—take this proposition for the membership and elevate these so-called second class citizens. And shit, it wouldn't have got to first base. Because we had too many people as it was. I mean the gradually drifted away and let's see—

[00:47:09] **HOWARD:** Anything from the thirties, can you think of any illustrations? Especially in Portland? Where the left was pushing on realistic goals or resolutions or something?

[00:47:17] **OSCAR:** No, they were all, as far as I can see, they might've been, I wasn't—I didn't have enough knowledge then, to pick one from another. In fact, I never gave it a thought. In fact, there were some guys who were damn good trade unionists, who in, when I think about it, could very well have been party, a member of one party or another. But who they were, I wouldn't know. I mean I know guys who could be, be good candidates.

[00:47:51] **ELMER:** I could give an instance of one what I would call a left-wing leader down there that did a lot to consolidate this local then. There was Roy Donnelly.

[00:48:00] **HOWARD:** Yes, I've heard of that name, that was from the thirties right?

[00:48:03] **ELMER:** Roy Donnelly. Now Roy Donnelly was a very volatile man. But he did have left-wing tendencies. And he believed in one union, and so forth. I remember one time we were still meeting on the Wilmington Bowl [boxing venue in Wilmington, California], the question of the scab bosses came up. There were a lot of scab bosses left after '34, in same positions and so forth and so on and so on. So Roy gets up and he says, "For the benefit of this local, we want the bosses where we could control them. Not where they control us." And he pushed through, despite a hell of a lot of opposition. That we take the bosses in as members of the union. Which is what we did. Remember that? Were you there then?

[00:49:02] **HOWARD:** What would be the basis of the opposition to that?

[00:49:07] **OSCAR:** Because they didn't like scabs. It's just the plain rank-and-file.

[00:49:10] **ELMER:** Well, on the surface. There was the surface-level. They don't want no scabs, period.

[00:49:15] **HOWARD:** But underneath?

[00:49:17] **ELMER:** Underneath? It was all hoping to becoming a boss someday. They forget that being a union member they wouldn't have that much opportunity.

[00:49:27] **HOWARD:** I see.

[00:49:29] **DON:** People who were a bit close, and other times, it's funny when get a new strike and get it over with, it seems as though they wanted to be the most militant of them. And they did the least for union, and try to

get the most for themselves. And that's very selfish reasons, and of course it's always prevalent, no matter what kind of organization you got or where you work. And individual—look at individualism.

[00:50:01] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you about Donnelly, how did you see Donnelly?

[00:50:07] **DON:** Just a man, that really didn't know which way was which. Sometimes he would say things that was good, and next time it would be the other way around.

[00:50:21] **HOWARD:** Could you be specific? A little more specific?

[00:50:24] **DON:** No, because it's been a long time. But we had some presence along the line in terms of popping up, like you shouldn't be.

[00:50:34] **HOWARD:** And you put Donnelly in that group then? [loud bang]

[00:50:36] **DON:** Yes, I would, wouldn't you?

[00:50:39] **ELMER:** Well, I wouldn't disparage as honest, no. The man was completely honest.

[00:50:44] **OSCAR:** Yes, he was honest. Quite intelligent and well-read.

[00:50:48] **ELMER:** Yes, very intelligent.

[00:50:53] **HOWARD:** He was red-baited I take it? Right? By other people?

[00:50:55] **ELMER:** Yes, that was his life's work, but the more he got red-baited the more he drives.

[00:51:01] **OSCAR:** I used to call him—I used to needle him, see him on the dock and needle him and he'd walk up and down the coast, down on the docks back and forth, and spot his trade union ideas and so forth. And I said, "Well, what kind of a—" I don't know what I asked him but to this extent, "What matter person are you?" And he said, "I'm an independent socialist."

[00:51:25] **ELMER:** Yup.

[00:51:25] **HOWARD:** Is that what he said?

[00:51:26] **ELMER:** Yes, that was his [inaudible] . He didn't adhere to any organized group, per se.

[00:51:37] **OSCAR:** See, the extreme left is the communist party and the people that I knew down there who I ran into because I was a business agent at the time, they thought that I could be a force at presenting certain things that they brought up. For instance, they started elevating, we started elevating some of these guys. They wanted, I forget what the percentage was now, but we didn't have ten percent of the membership we were other than white—or Mexican would sometimes be considered white. And what they wanted was to bring it up to ten percent or ten percent or more. You know, bring it up whether the membership whether he was taking members or not, for registration. Now, how the hell is—what's that going to do somebody, for instance who is a good force in the organizations and fights to carry out good trade union policy, what's it going to do to his standing with the membership? He deliberately cuts his feet out from under you. So what I'm trying to say is it's those people who couldn't be a force for good, they could bust the goddamn union wide open if there was enough of them, but they weren't. So they didn't become a real force, and they just kind of slid back into the background. I

remember being on the, as a member of the executive board, of course I can't remember which one, they had a goddamn policy—the party had a policy that the guys who come out from behind the woodwork and tell everybody what their political leanings were.

[00:53:33] **HOWARD:** When was that? After the war, or do you remember?

[00:53:35] **OSCAR:** Yes, after war, yes. It was probably—

[00:53:42] **HOWARD:** 'Forty-six, I think, wasn't it?

[00:53:43] **OSCAR:** Well the war was ended in '46. I would say it was around 1950 or before, that they tried this stuff. And it's impossible to get to pass that fourth membership, even if nobody spoke against you. You could put that on the floor and they'd say, "Boo!" And so they, these guys, they had no leadership amongst themselves.

[00:54:15] **ELMER:** I have an observation for you that might be interested in. I think one of the greatest foes to the left-wing thinking, whether it might or not I don't know, was the Stalin-Hitler Pact [Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact]. The people who were inclined to think that way were so completely disillusioned, that the left-wing leadership was completely discredited for years. Because the average guy just couldn't figure out, [inaudible], they just couldn't. Because here was the ILWU International, trying to rally the forces behind the war effort, and all that stuff. But it was a very disillusioning blow to some of the people who were, who were maybe beginning to think that way.

[00:55:07] **HOWARD:** Was that true on the docks as well?

[00:55:09] **ELMER:** Yes. I mean that's my impression. I don't know whether Oscar would concur or not. [pause] But that's my personal impression, I may be entirely incorrect.

[00:55:25] **HOWARD:** You know a lot of people have suggested that, that was the major thing that a lot of people left the party around that time as well.

[00:55:31] **OSCAR:** And even a little bit later they had, let's see if I can remember. They had a guy by the name of Earl Browder of the Communist Party. Now he fucked up the Communist Party, and then after him came this Foster, and they had this thing going on the waterfront, Zigzag Foster.

[00:55:58] **HOWARD:** Zigzag Foster. Wasn't that, it was probably [Earl] Browder wasn't it? Or was it Foster?

[00:56:02] **ELMER:** Zigzag Foster.

[00:56:03] **HOWARD:** Why did they call him Zigzag?

[00:56:04] **OSCAR:** Because his middle initial was Z.

[00:56:06] **HOWARD:** Okay, but why Zigzag? Do you remember?

[00:56:08] **OSCAR:** Because he was cooperating and not cooperating in the war effort.

[00:56:15] **HOWARD:** I don't think so. Browder was in during the war.

[00:56:18] **OSCAR:** Foster came afterward, right?

[00:56:20] **HOWARD:** Yes. And Foster came in on the basis of criticizing the zigzag's that Browder had done. Maybe it looked like because the party was zigzagging and Foster was the head.

[00:56:30] **OSCAR:** Yes, I imagine so.

[00:56:31] **HOWARD:** They actually called him Zigzag Foster on the waterfront?

[00:56:34] **OSCAR:** Well, not only the waterfront it was all over the place. Anybody that wanted to negate anything that people who were pro—they wanted to negate it the people who were pro-communist minds. Well I don't—[pause] San Pedro went from one goddamn direction to another. And as time went on, San Pedro was known as the most biggest fuck-up and the most radical of all the locals up and down the coast. They didn't follow the international policy, if it didn't suit them. No matter how—

[00:57:32] **ELMER:** It wasn't radical, it was undisciplined.

[00:57:34] **HOWARD:** Right, there's a difference.

[00:57:36] **ELMER:** Undisciplined.

[00:57:37] **OSCAR:** Well, yes they were—

[00:57:38] **DON:** Was that during the war?

[00:57:42] **OSCAR:** After the war.

[00:57:43] **HOWARD:** During and certainly M&M [Mechanization and Modernization Agreement] right?

[00:57:46] **OSCAR:** L.B. Thomas was one of the guys that would—

[00:57:48] **ELMER:** I would say undisciplined. Undisciplined. The most erratic local on the coast.

[00:57:55] **OSCAR:** And some the local's leadership was fueling the fire.

[00:58:03] **HOWARD:** Who came in after Donnelly do you remember?

[00:58:05] **ELMER:** Yes, [?Hernie Bowen?] .

[00:58:06] **HOWARD:** Was Bowen a left-winger also or not?

[00:58:09] **OSCAR:** No.

[00:58:10] **HOWARD:** No? Right-winger? Middle of the road?

[00:58:12] **OSCAR:** He was just a [pause] just a trade unionist.

[00:58:17] **ELMER:** He was more or less apolitical. I would say.

[00:58:21] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you a dumb question, when the membership elects a guy like Donnelly and then elects a guy like Bowen, does that signify a change in their views?

[00:58:31] **OSCAR:** Well you got to understand that the local's rules were that no elected officials could be in office for over two years at a time. And you had to be off for two years.

[00:58:45] **HOWARD:** Why couldn't Donnelly select an heir apparent among the left-wingers and say, "This is the guy I endorse,"?

[00:58:53] **ELMER:** We did have one guy, Lyle Proctor. Lyle Proctor.

[00:58:59] **OSCAR:** Yes, I had Bill Lawrence [pause] defeated, when he ran against Proctor. Because Lawrence at that time, I knew something was off about Lawrence and I didn't want to see him get into office and we taught that son of bitch a lesson. We put out a pamphlet showing what kind of trade unionist Proctor was, and it listed it, with all the committees that he was on, it was a mile long. And I stood right out on the side the union office, where we had the voting booths inside and [laughs] he beat Bill Lawrence. And Bill Lawrence said to himself, and other people were saying, 'I won't have much trouble with that guy.' And he got beat.

[00:59:47] **ELMER:** But Lyle Proctor [pause] was very ineffective. He was an avowed left-winger.

[00:59:55] **HOWARD:** Now when you say avowed, did he actually state that he was a member of the party or—

[01:00:00] **ELMER:** No. He never said that. But he was a left-winger.

[01:00:03] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you before I forget, did anyone in either Portland at that time, or Pedro while you guys have been here, ever sort of openly say, 'I'm a member of the Communist Party'?

[01:00:14] **OSCAR:** We had one guy that went around wearing a hammer and sickle.

[01:00:20] **HOWARD:** Is that guy still alive?

[01:00:22] **OSCAR:** No, he's dead now. Henry [?Utetch?] .

[01:00:26] **HOWARD:** Oh, I heard that name. Did he ever end up in Local 10. Or not?

[END PART TWO/BEGIN PART THREE]

[01:00:32] **OSCAR:** Lyle Proctor was in it from '43 to '44. Then came Bill Lawrence.

[01:00:52] **ELMER:** Lyle took hell of a beating. He was, battered from all sides. Stood a year of it, moved back to Missouri and that's the last I've ever heard of him.

[01:01:08] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

The reason I was concerned about this because is because if you look at San Francisco, the local up there, it really goes back and forth, from about the left-wingers to the right-wingers almost every other term. And they've offered a number of explanations for that but I'm just trying to see if that same phenomenon took place in Pedro, for instance.

[01:01:26] **ELMER:** Not in such rhythm.

[01:01:27] **HOWARD:** Not like that, huh?

[01:01:28] **DON:** No, it wasn't organized.

[01:01:29] **ELMER:** The left-wingers, or the guys that were left-leaning didn't get elected, it was more or less a fluke. I would say.

[01:01:37] **HOWARD:** It was a fluke, huh? Would that be a fair statement? Sort of a fluke? So you say generally, it was sort of middle of the road, trade unionists, apolitical guys who were running the show?

[01:01:49] **ELMER:** That would be my opinion.

[01:01:51] **HOWARD:** Why would a left-winger get elected?

[01:01:55] **ELMER:** Well one, he may have presented a program that appealed rank and file. Two, he may have been more eloquent in presenting his program and the guys bought it, that's all. A lot of the so-called people, or left-wingers here were very ineloquent. They couldn't express their views in public. It was difficult for them to do so. A lot of them were very mild-mannered. In manner. They weren't aggressive.

[01:02:29] **OSCAR:** That's part of being a voice in the union. You follow certain leaders. L.B. Thomas is a good example. And he's about the only one that could go around and gather people around him, and influence them and put them in office. And he had me defeated for secretary one time.

[01:02:54] **HOWARD:** Was he considered a left-winger?

[01:02:57] **OSCAR:** No, it's a funny thing about L.B. Thomas, he had left-wing ideas, and then he had right-wing ideas. I mean he was a zigzag. It's a funny thing. When he died, he had two daughters, and they—what do you say at a funeral, at the grave side?

[01:03:26] **HOWARD:** A eulogy?

[01:03:27] **OSCAR:** Yes, these two daughters gave the eulogy. And it was a strictly a left-wing eulogy.

[01:03:34] **ELMER:** I wasn't there so I couldn't say.

[01:03:35] **OSCAR:** No I who was there, I asked him. Gordon Giddon was there. So you see, we have some complex characters in this place down here.

[01:03:52] **ELMER:** Off the record.

[01:03:56] **HOWARD:** This is going to be an even more difficult question, but how many guys do you think in your opinion, again as outsiders, would be sort of considered either party members or closed to the party in Local 13, say during the thirties? Late thirties? In rough figures. We'll do it independently, so you don't influence on another. What would you guess? Or would you give me a guess on Portland, because I'd love to just get a wild guess there. Nothing at all?

[01:04:25] **OSCAR:** I couldn't guess even one. You could guess more than I could on Portland.

[01:04:33] **HOWARD:** I don't know. I can't. I can't figure out Portland.

[01:04:38] **ELMER:** You know what my guess would be? Utter utmost? Ten.

[01:04:42] **HOWARD:** In this local? In the late thirties? Ten?

[01:04:45] **ELMER:** Yes.

[01:04:46] **HOWARD:** And how about sympathizers? Would that include sympathizers?

[01:04:49] **ELMER:** No. I would say maybe a couple hundred sympathizers.

[01:04:52] **HOWARD:** So you're maybe talking about maybe 10 members? I understand that.

[01:04:57] **ELMER:** Very, very roughly.

[01:04:58] **HOWARD:** And a couple of hundred possible sympathizers.

[01:05:01] **OSCAR:** I think they were less in both categories.

[01:05:03] **HOWARD:** In Portland? Or here?

[01:05:05] **OSCAR:** Yes, that is out and out Communist Party members.

[01:05:09] **HOWARD:** Yes. Less than 10?

[01:05:12] **OSCAR:** Yes, and on the political basis, I can't see where 200 communists, whether it would be 200 to follow the policy and those guys. Because if they did—

[01:05:29] **ELMER:** You think that's high?

[01:05:31] **OSCAR:** I think that's high, simply because if there were 200 of them, there'd be more down on the mic. You got to take it on that direction.

[01:05:39] **ELMER:** Maybe you're right. But I was just thinking at the top of my head.

[01:05:42] **HOWARD:** Yes, it's difficult to talk about what support really means too. You know, you can support a guy cause he's a militant trade unionist and when he begins to push a political line you don't like, you back away. So I think my sense of it is the communists were certainly able to get support as trade unionists during the thirties, for instance, but then lost a lot of that support when they went into areas of foreign policy and things like that in the early fifties, late forties. In any event, they're penetration in this local was really negligible, it sounds like.

[01:06:11] **ELMER:** Almost zilch.

[01:06:12] **DON:** I don't think any of the fellows got any place.

[01:06:19] **HOWARD:** And why do you think that was so? We've been through it, I just want to get as many—

[01:06:27] **DON:** Too many the other way. There was loyalty.

[01:06:33] **HOWARD:** So you see it, from your perspective, a question of sort of loyalty to the traditions of the ILA versus these sort of outside agitators?

[01:06:42] **DON:** Yes. I don't think they got any place in the. . .

[01:06:49] **OSCAR:** I think it was because their policies were going too far out all the time, too radical.

[01:06:56] **HOWARD:** See, I'm trying to get a handle on, I mean you gave me one illustration after the war, but certainly during the thirties, nothing that they seemed to be advocating was too radical, that I could see.

[01:07:05] **DON:** Well, I don't think so either.

[01:07:07] **HOWARD:** They were pushing job actions, they were pushing job control.

[01:07:11] **OSCAR:** Were they a force? That's the point.

[01:07:14] **ELMER:** They weren't a force.

[01:07:15] **HOWARD:** Right. Why? They were pushing nothing that, the men were doing everything the Communists were telling them they should have been doing.

[01:07:21] **DON:** No, I don't think so.

[01:07:22] **OSCAR:** Well, they couldn't separate that from the trade from the trade union deal, trade union rule. You see, at the same time we were having the auto strikes and so forth—and they sure as hell looked radical. You know, to people on the outside. So certainly, the demands of the longshoremen and the strikes that we had, weren't as outrageous as sit-down strikes where the goddamn factories were taken over.

It goes like this. And one thing I can't put together in my own mind, I was thinking, the sailors here, under the NMU [National Maritime Union], had a lot of party members in them. I was an official for the union in '46, and we had—'44 to '46 and the NMU had their office upstairs. So I had a deal with them. Well Christ, I mean I got to know, probably 15 or 20 of them guys, because they'd come in and out on these ships, some would stay in port for a while, and maybe one or two would be more or less stationary. And they'd come in and out and they were traveling on, they were traveling from coast to coast. Inter-coastal. And of course the NMU was a progressive radical movement at that time. They had a hell of a lot of communists. Book-carrying members.

[01:09:13] **ELMER:** Speaking of the NMU, most people don't know that the NMU began in San Pedro.

[01:09:17] **HOWARD:** I didn't know that. You mean out here on the West Coast? Or. . .?

[01:09:19] **ELMER:** Yup. The California came out of there, Joe Curran was focusing on there, he had an effective, very left-wing stance that marched the whole crew ashore in 1936. We weren't Local 13 yet, we were still in the ILA, we hadn't advanced enough money to set up an office, here. The NMU started right here in San Pedro. And Joe Curran double-crossed and chopped the whole thing down in 1946 after the war was over. Left a [?vegetable?] in Santa Cruz.

[01:09:53] **HOWARD:** With that Committee of Maritime Unity, or what?

[01:09:56] **ELMER:** That son of a bitch, I'm telling you, I never did trust him. He'd come up that California with that pea coat on and watch cap, tougher than hobs. And he'd effected a real left-wing stance, took the whole crew with him.

[01:10:15] **HOWARD:** Yes, what happened in the NMU was real interesting, why those guys would still follow Curran, because you're right, the rest of the leadership in NMU except Curran were Party members, most of them were open [about it]. Ferdinand Smith, [Fredrick] "Blackie" Myers guys like that. And Curran, in turn—I tend to think it's really the force of these individuals, a guy like Bridges, because the real thrust of the research is to explain how a guy like Harry Bridges, who had talked openly about his radical views and things like that could stay in power for so long and suffer so few defections.

[01:10:44] **ELMER:** The guys trusted him, that's all.

[01:10:46] **HOWARD:** Just a question of trust?

[01:10:47] **ELMER:** Complete trust.

[01:10:48] **HOWARD:** And he could've been a fascist. As long as he was trustworthy?

[01:10:51] **ELMER:** They wouldn't have gone for fascist.

[01:10:53] **HOWARD:** I mean I was just throwing it out as a hypothetical. It had to be something—why did you support—did you support Bridges generally? Why?

[01:11:01] **DON:** Yes. He was always for the working man. For us fellows, and the work—he had good [pause] idea on what this unity should be. This is why the union today was [inaudible] idealist.

[01:11:26] **HOWARD:** Now what about when somebody would say, yes that might true, but Harry's a goddamn Red. What would you say?

[01:11:32] **DON:** Well, I would say no.

[01:11:36] **HOWARD:** Well, he isn't in the party, but he supports them, he sympathizes with them.

[01:11:41] **OSCAR:** He admitted that he did.

[01:11:43] **HOWARD:** I know.

[01:11:43] **DON:** A lot of people did too. But then later, they sympathize with them. But then, on the other hand he had something going that was more powerful than his ideas.

[01:11:57] **HOWARD:** Which was what?

[01:11:59] **DON:** Was to get this union, what the port is today. I may be wrong, but without Harry Bridges at the head of it, we'd still be fighting on the waterfront.

[01:12:17] **ELMER:** I just boil it down to one simple phrase: that men trusted him. They split his economic ideas for the union apart from his political ideas.

[01:12:38] **HOWARD:** You think they did?

[01:12:38] **ELMER:** Right down the center.

[01:12:38] **OSCAR:** They did what?

[01:12:38] **ELMER:** They split his economic ideas for the union apart from his political ideas.

[01:12:42] **HOWARD:** Can you give me an illustration where that might've taken place? You know, I can think of the Korean situation.

[01:12:54] **OSCAR:** Yes, I was thinking of that. They threw him in the bucket.

[01:12:59] **HOWARD:** But, the men walked out, right? To support him, even though they didn't agree.

[01:13:03] **OUTSIDE:** Excuse me, Don?

[01:13:03] **OSCAR:** You see, yes. He lived the part of it, of trade union leader too. No goddamn heirs, circulated amongst the guys, you know, of course one time he did have body guards but that was when they were about to dump him. But if you put real honest to god facts on the table, and over the years you've made them work, and this benefit progressively—although some people wouldn't think so, it'd benefit progressively more for each and every skirmish or battle. Now, you've got to have something, or we wouldn't follow it. And he lived like the average man.

I was on the negotiating committee in San Francisco in 1948, when he had a bad ulcer. To bring the goddamn strike to its conclusion, which we did on the Thanksgiving Day. Prior to that he was drinking milk and doing everything he could to stay afloat and carry on the negotiations, and after it was over, he had an operation. He had to sell his home and buy, get a cheaper one to pay the bill. And out of that, more or less, it helped to get fringe benefits for us on the waterfront.

[01:14:52] **ELMER:** He'd get [?beat?] up for it all the time.

[01:14:54] **OSCAR:** He set a good example.

[01:14:56] **HOWARD:** Yes, the problem with that, I think these are all good explanations, but the problem is that the other left-wing leaders did the same thing as far as I can tell in the UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America] and Mine Mill [International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers] and some of the smaller left-wing unions. The leaderships adopted similar lifestyles, they delivered the goods, but they never stayed around like Harry. So the question is, what more did Harry have to offer? It may have been that he came to power during the height of the '34 strike. I think that's an important part of the story.

[01:15:25] **OSCAR:** Well, yes.

[01:15:27] **ELMER:** He had a charisma too.

[01:15:30] **HOWARD:** You think so? Now I've seen him and I don't see that at all. With that impenetrable cockney accent, and he's a little, short guy. . .

[01:15:36] **ELMER:** Well he can mesmerize a crowd.

[01:15:38] **HOWARD:** How?

[01:15:38] **ELMER:** He actually mesmerized the crowd. I saw him at the Wilmington Bowl. The most unruly bunch of bastards you've ever seen, waiting for him.

[01:15:49] **HOWARD:** Was this during the war? Early war period?

[01:15:51] **ELMER:** Before. After the '34. '36. During the foreman's beef in '38. The most unruly bunch of mob you've ever seen. In 20 minutes, he'd have them calmed down. And listening to every word he said.

[01:16:15] **OSCAR:** I think he did his best—

[01:16:17] **DON:** I'm sorry gentlemen, but I have to leave.

[01:16:20] **HOWARD:** Okay, it was nice speaking with you I'm glad you were able to participate.

[01:16:22] **DON:** What is this for now?

[01:16:25] **HOWARD:** I'm writing a dissertation at UCLA and if it ever gets to a stage of publication, you'll be included among those who I acknowledge.

[01:16:32] **DON:** I was supposed to be home at three o'clock.

[01:16:37] **HOWARD:** Uh-oh. [laughs] Blame it on me.

[01:16:52] **DON:** You know, my memory isn't as good as it used to be.

[01:16:55] **HOWARD:** I know that. That's ok. Thanks a lot!

[01:17:04] **OSCAR:** How old are you, Elmer?

[01:17:04] **ELMER:** I'm 69.

[01:17:06] **OSCAR:** I'm 78.

[01:17:08] **HOWARD:** All babies!

[01:17:10] **ELMER:** How much time is left?

[01:17:12] **HOWARD:** Fifteen minutes? Is that alright?

[01:17:13] **OSCAR:** Well he was talking about Harry Bridges' charisma, he had a way of expressing himself in the heat of the battle. Can't be beat. I heard his speeches and that I didn't think that he would carry as well as he could. But I'll tell you when it came down to values, he'd started rolling up his sleeves, he had vocabulary that you couldn't beat. He'd lay it out on the table and— [inaudible] [laughs]. And I heard the employers sit there

when we met for negotiations and so forth, listen to that son of bitch and shake their heads. You know, because at the heat of the battle is where that guy could really operate.

[01:18:05] **ELMER:** You know one of the best ripostes I'd ever seen from him. It'd become kind of our standard. After he was cleared, well last time after his alleged communist membership and so forth, he came down to a very hostile meeting. Guys were talking about heckling him and red-baiting him and all that kind of crap. He'd reached inside of his coat pocket and pulled out an alleged document that says, "This document here says that I'm not a Communist. Can you prove the same thing yourselves?" And they'd all dummy up. [laughs] "I can prove that I'm not," he says, "The document shows it, can you do the same thing?" Remember those? Oh geez that was funny. But he could get before the most hostile crowd. And with his choice of English, his eloquence, like I say, in 20 minutes time he could have them calmed down—maybe not convinced, but completely calmed down.

[01:19:30] **HOWARD:** Let me come in with another alternative. Is it possible that also the men subscribe to a vision that Bridges articulated, in other words, he wasn't just in it for the pork chops [reference to a union member only in it for the pay], I think that he made it pretty clear that the union had to be a social movement and you don't have to be a Communist to agree with that certainly. And is it possible that some number of men anyway subscribed to that vision? And said, "Yes, you know the union should be more than just a question of bread and butter." I mean, to me that would be radicalization, if that were taking place, you see? If we don't pose it in terms of they were all communist who supported him or they were all anti-communist who were against him, and that's obviously too simple.

[01:20:08] **OSCAR:** What's wrong with that is the fact that some guys wants to argue against, for instance a bill that's going to hurt labor. And bring it up to Ty Reeves and say, "What're you giving us that shit for?" And he says, "We want some bread and butter stuff here. To hell with it, we don't want to hear all you goddamn politics."

[01:20:34] **ELMER:** Now, I don't know about the rest of the coast, but once you're probably alluding to, is probably very far-fetched for San Pedro.

[01:20:42] **HOWARD:** Ok, that's what I want to know.

[01:20:43] **ELMER:** These guys down there have no, absolutely no interest in any social movement. Period. None whatsoever, outside a handful of guys.

[01:20:55] **HOWARD:** Okay, so if Bridges were supported in Pedro, it was on the basis of delivering the goods, that sort of thing pretty much? And trust?

[01:21:01] **ELMER:** Material goods, period.

[01:21:04] **HOWARD:** Now my sense is that that's not that the way—

[01:21:06] **OSCAR:** Not necessarily with trust, either. It just looked good to him.

[01:21:12] **HOWARD:** So, Bridges delivered the goods, in Pedro.

[01:21:13] **OSCAR:** Right. Not trust, I think if these guys go as so far to trust anyone, it comes down to—

[01:21:24] **ELMER:** Will you gentlemen excuse me? I have to go to—

[01:21:25] **HOWARD:** Okay, we're almost done here, anyway. Would your sense be that that was pretty much the way it was in Portland or was there more of a component up there for that social movement vision that Bridges developed or. . . ? I mean you dealt with people from Portland all the time, right? Even when you moved down here. And Seattle.

[01:21:48] **OSCAR:** Not so much. Because, outside, when I started on the international on the executive board and the negotiating committee, I was a local official and it was only the presidents we had communication with the locals and individuals. [squeaking on the recording] But I wasn't there, actually, long enough, to take hold. I had been blackballed for two-and-half years before the strike, came back to work during the strike, came back to the waterfront. I had served a little hitch up in the lumber camps, to get a few dollars, and when the strike came on I took the job and went on the waterfront, because that's where my heart and interests were.

[01:22:41] **HOWARD:** So you did the circuit from the logging camp to the waterfront?

[01:22:44] **OSCAR:** Oh I didn't stay on the logging camp for very long, maybe four to five months. And that's how I knew the difference between what they had, in the way of electric lights and clean sheets, and good food and bedding to be changed, people to make the beds and so forth, sweep up for them. Anyway, directly opposite of what I had seen in northern Wisconsin when I went to the lumber camps when I was 16 or 17. They had cooties and had [inaudible] the blankets and everything else. So I did know a little bit about the lumbering union. Who constituted lumber. . .

[01:23:39] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you a question about that, before we get off of it, one of the things I tried to do in the first chapter was to argue that the West Coast was susceptible to radicalism in the twenties compared to the East Coast because you had the loggers who were radicals up in the Northwest. You had the seamen coming into the industry all along the coast. And in Pedro you had a number of these hard rock miners moving into the industry, and they essentially brought with them radical ideas or radical predispositions. In my committee after reading it, said "Well we've got to have proof of this." So what I was wondering is if you can of anything prominent sort or radicals or militants in the leadership of the union, where they came from, like Rosco, wasn't he a former lumber worker? With the logs? I interviewed him and I think that's what he said, now that I—

[01:24:24] **OSCAR:** He may have been, I don't know. I first met him on the waterfront when I came here.

[01:24:29] **HOWARD:** He came on about the same time year you did, in '28, I think. 'Twenty-seven, twenty-eight.

[01:24:30] **OSCAR:** We didn't get to circulate around very much before we had a union. You worked with somebody, you worked with the same company all the time, and you didn't know who the hell everyone else was.

[01:24:47] **HOWARD:** What about the other guys? Like Conrad Negstad. Do you remember his name?

[01:24:53] **OSCAR:** Oh, I remember Conrad, yes.

[01:24:55] **HOWARD:** He was an old AF of L hack or something.

[01:24:57] **OSCAR:** Yes, he and Bill Fisher, he was the guy who helped him, dumped the Committee of Maritime Unity for—

[01:25:08] **HOWARD:** What Matt Meehan? He came later on, didn't he?

[01:25:15] **OSCAR:** I don't know when he came in, but he was a rabble-rouser, and he did his job as a rabble-rouser. Good trade unionists.

[01:25:23] **HOWARD:** Did he come from a logging background?

[01:25:28] **OSCAR:** I don't know. See, I don't know. I can't say where any of them came from.

[01:25:36] **ELMER:** I can truthfully say, of course, I was just a young punk, when I came—but I can't think of any outstanding leader in this local.

[01:25:46] **HOWARD:** You can't?

[01:25:46] **ELMER:** Among the longshoremen.

[01:25:47] **HOWARD:** This was in, what? Early thirties or something?

[01:25:55] **ELMER:** Or even during the twenties.

[01:25:58] **HOWARD:** Twenties it wouldn't have been, I'm sure.

[01:26:01] **ELMER:** There was never an outstanding leadership of any kind in this port.

[01:26:05] **HOWARD:** That's true, it seemed like Portland and San Francisco supplied most of the international officers in the union. It's strange. Seattle didn't seem to contribute to any either. You had Howard [?Bowden?] up there, Craycraft, Matt Meehan.

[01:26:23] **ELMER:** You had some potential leadership, here, Tom Brown [inaudible] .

[01:26:29] **HOWARD:** I've never heard of him.

[01:26:32] **ELMER:** And there again was the criticism of the left wing at that time, Tom Brown was on Electrical Committee, when Wallace ran for president in California, and things of that nature. They felt that it was, well I don't know if it's Communist directives or what, but it split the union. Everybody was for Roosevelt. Wallace ran, they conned Tom Brown, who was very outstanding, on the rise leader in this local. And nobody knows if he was killed accidentally or committed suicide.

[01:27:24] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right?

[01:27:27] **ELMER:** [to Oscar] Were you down here when Tom Brown died?

[01:27:32] **HOWARD:** So he associated himself with the Wallace campaign and ended up isolating himself? You know, the more I read into this, the more I realize the demise of the left was much their own fault as the red-baiting and attacks they got from everyone else. Became they made a series of tactical blunders, one after another it seems.

[01:27:52] **ELMER:** Well the trouble with the IWW in the first place, they'd been going for many years, is they never developed any leadership. They would organize an area or an industry, and put somebody at the head of it, but they didn't have enough knowledge to keep the thing going, to organize and make it a solid union, you know? It's what happened in the Northwest.

[01:28:21] **HOWARD:** But they had a terrific impact though, didn't they? They were syndicalists, sort of direct nationally—

[01:28:24] **OSCAR:** Oh yes, see that's where they were, when they needed an inroad was amongst the radical rank-and-filer, who is down there on the job, as conditions were bad he was going to change it, the moment he had the opportunity. That's the reason why this whole thing got organized and got going so fast that year, because everybody was beat down, for Christ's sake. They worked under conditions that were goddamn inhuman that you tell people out of the industry, they didn't believe you. They wouldn't believe you. For instance, I carried 140 pound sacks of flour on my shoulders, 12 men down in a hole, averaging 8 tons per hour per man on their shoulders.

[01:29:22] **ELMER:** I used to do the same thing on the coastwise, on the Pacific Steam.

[01:29:27] **OSCAR:** Instances where the guy would be working on the waterfront only on the basis that guy's bosses or superintendent were screwing his wife, for Christ's sakes. That's not out of. . .

[01:29:46] **ELMER:** Or go and paint his house on his days off, or build a fence of those days. Or prune his avocado orchard.

[01:29:56] **HOWARD:** See what's weird is that it's just as bad as it was in New York and yet in New York, they totally repudiated the Wobblies, and on the West Coast they seemed to be much more supportive in that period after the war and I'm trying to figure out why that should be the case, why the workers on the West Coast would be more supportive of the Wobblies.

[01:30:12] **ELMER:** Well first place, the East Coast unions had a long tradition of racketeering. A great proportion of those people are from Eastern—from Latin Europe. Great proportion of them were Catholic, Irish and Italians. And they rejected anything that smacked the radicalism.

[01:30:49] **HOWARD:** Why? In the TWU [Transport Workers Union of America], the Irish were real radical.

[END PART THREE]